

# **INCLUSO: Social Software for the Social Inclusion of Marginalised Youth**

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**Abstract.** Can ICT, and more specifically social software, support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters? What is the role of welfare organisations working with such youngsters in this story and what are the main challenges that need to be overcome when using social software as a tool to alleviate social exclusion? This paper reports findings from the INCLUSO project and pilot projects in 4 partner organisations throughout Europe and presents tools to assist social work organisations in defining successful strategies for adopting ICT and social software within their organisation.

**Keywords:** ICT, Social Software, Social Inclusion, Youth at Risk, Marginalised Youth

## **1 Introduction**

Can ICT, and more specifically social software, support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters? This was the main research question of INCLUSO, a research project funded by the European Commission's 7<sup>th</sup> Framework programme. The project aimed to define and explore the challenges and opportunities met when social software is used by welfare organisations that work with marginalised youngsters as a tool to support their approach on alleviating social exclusion.

Even though the scope of the INCLUSO project also incorporated a focus on the business and sustainability side of ICT use by organisations working with marginalised youth, our focus was rather technological at the start of the project in 2008. The project's consortium was keen on exploring and measuring the precise effects of the use of social software applications such as social network sites (SNS) by marginalised youngsters and the organisations that work with them.

It soon turned out however, that the actual adoption process of these ICT tools by our target organisations would pose much different challenges than we had anticipated. Many of the social work organisations we talked to, including those that were part of our project consortium had little or no experience with the use of ICT

and social software in specific to interact with their target groups. Instead of technological, most of the questions raised were organisational. How could existing methods to work with a target group be successfully complemented by online activities? Could this be a spontaneous, bottom-up process or would it need to be fully embedded within the structure and strategy of an organisation? What would this mean in terms of cost and training of staff? What about the equipment needed? What about the privacy of both the youngsters as well as the social workers? How could success be measured over time?

These and other questions made us realise that the scope of this project would grow much wider than just finding the right technology and implementing it.

## **2 Social Inclusion and Social Exclusion**

Promoting social inclusion, or undertaking affirmative actions in order to reverse the social exclusion of individuals and groups in our society, has become a strong focus of the European Commission over the past years. More and more coordinated actions are being taken on a variety of levels in order to make sure that every European citizen is able to contribute to and benefit from social and economical progress.

Describing the concept of social exclusion in full is a daunting task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it is worth noting that even though many initiatives aimed at alleviating social exclusion focus on creating jobs, social exclusion goes beyond the issue of material poverty and can be seen as a multidimensional concept [1,2]. It can be seen as encompassing other forms of social disadvantages such as lack of regular and equal access to education, health care, social care and housing. Causes for exclusion too encompass a wide range of reasons why individuals or groups might be excluded, such as discrimination against immigrants, ethnic minorities, the disabled, the elderly or ex-offenders [3]. In short one can be socially excluded in a multitude of ways, for a multitude of reasons.

Although the grounds for social exclusion of adults and youngsters are largely the same, it is worthwhile to go deeper into the specific case of the latter. Youngsters find themselves in a crucial stage of their life where one mistake can often be paid for repeatedly, well into adulthood. Personal characteristics such as parental socio-economical status, gender, disability, health, ethnicity, religion, place of residence and geographical mobility are among the factors that may have an impact on future unemployment or low wages. A good education, training, good health and similar productivity enhancing investments during one's younger years will often pay off later in life.

Youngsters today are in need of ample experimentation with their identities and how they see themselves in the future. Yet this experimentation with various identities and rebellion against older generations is less straightforward for those growing up in poorer circles and socio-economically homogenous neighbourhoods [2]. When youth rebellion and experimentation has no constructive outlet, peer group relations can lead youngsters into a negative spiral of social exclusion. Research is increasingly taking neighbourhood effects into account in predicting the individual disadvantage of youth [5]. Too much internal interaction in socio-economically

homogenous neighbourhoods may socially isolate residents and limit information networks [6].

### **3 e-Inclusion and the digital divide**

As more and more information and services are available in digital form today, socially disadvantaged people and those less favoured find themselves at risk of being excluded from the potential benefits of our ever-growing information society.

Even though access to internet is on the rise throughout Europe and it seems that the digital divide is slowly being bridged, we should not forget that those who are most deprived socially are least likely to have access to digital resources such as online services [8], which could result in a 'rich getting richer' scenario, if the issue is not handled properly.

More recent literature makes note of an evolution in the nature of the digital divide. While the digital divide, separating those with access to ICT and the Internet from those without might be narrowing, some researchers have pointed out that the digital divide needs to be seen as encompassing many layers or stages of access to ICT and its adoption [8, 9, 10]. What we do with ICT depends on our skills as well as what we seek from it on a personal level. When observing how those at risk of social exclusion make use of the Internet, we should look beyond skill and training alone, as what people expect, want and 'consume' on the Internet seems to be related to socio-economical status. Research by Bonfadelli (2002) finds that people with lower incomes more often use the internet for entertainment purposes and people with higher income more often for informational and service oriented purposes. Helsper (2008) finds that the 'complexity' of what we do online is connected to one's socio-economical status, with those higher up the ladder of social inclusion using the internet for activities as doing finances or civic engagement. Another study by Valentine et al. [11] finds that students using ICT for educational purposes had higher educational attainment than those using ICT solely for entertainment purposes. In other words, not only access to ICT but especially 'how' we use ICT matters.

## **4 What we know: Social software and Social Inclusion**

### **4.1 Youngsters and Social Software**

Since its conception by social media consultant and writer Clay Shirky in 2002 the term 'Social Software' has been adopted and interpreted by many in different ways. Shirky used the term to encompass all uses of software that supported interacting groups, even if the interaction was offline. Many argue that the term 'social software' is just another way to describe tools that support social interaction between people that already existed for much longer. Tools like e-mail and message boards are decades old, after all.

Then what makes these tools today so different from their predecessors? Boyd argues that as more and more people found their way to the Internet, the classical ways of grouping people online simply around subjects proved less scalable and more sophisticated ways were needed to allow people to find their place online. Just like in the real world, where we do not flock together simply based on a shared interest, we also look for shared cultural values and perspectives on those topics: we try to find those places online where people not only share a similar interest, but also a same taste, way of communicating or style [12]. The internet is not just a repository for information and services anymore, but is also growing, more and more into a virtual representation of the real world; a public space in which we have the need to identify ourselves as well as possible and interact with others in the same nuanced way as we are used to do offline.

For many youngsters throughout the world with regular access to the Internet, social software tools have become a popular way for them to learn to express themselves in public, experiment with different identities under the guise of different pseudonyms and interact with peers [14,15], be it for entertainment purposes (hanging out) or educational purposes. Whereas early studies on the potential of ICT to support social interactions, explored the potential of these platforms to extend the personal network by meeting new people, much of the literature today finds that social software is used especially to stay in touch with people they already know [16-18]. Youngsters use new media as an almost natural extension of offline interactions bridging the gaps between moments of face-to-face contact (friendship-based network interactions).

When youngsters do engage in interactions with people that they do not already know in an offline context, they do so mainly in online communities around specific topics of interest. Interest-based network interactions are worthy of note, because their design seems to encourage social interactions with and new connections to contacts beyond the direct neighbourhood of these youngsters [17].

#### **4.2. Potential Benefits of Social Software**

We see the potential of social software as a tool to alleviate the social exclusion of marginalised youngsters as twofold. Firstly, proper use of social software can have beneficial effects on one's social capital [19], increasing the amount of benefits one might gain from having social ties to other people. Many of the benefits we gain from an increase in social capital can be connected to reasons why one might be more or less socially included [20].

The literature on social capital is extensive and many dimensions are introduced. Putnam [21] describes two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital, being the benefits we receive by being a part of closely knit networks held together by strong ties, amongst which we find emotional support, financial support and the swift flow of (redundant) information. Bridging social capital encompasses those benefits we receive from being connected to networks outside of our regular networks, usually through people we don't know so well. Granovetter [22,23] elaborates on the notion of bridging social capital by describing the benefits we may gain from the weak ties in our networks and states that

it is especially through these weak ties that we are most likely to gain access to new and useful information or jobs for example. This is especially interesting for the specific case of marginalised young people as a means to lift them out of their socio-economically homogenous network and bring them in touch with others [24].

Aside from the intrinsic effects of social software use we can also look at social software as a way to supplement the approach taken by welfare organisations already working with marginalised youngsters. Certain activities between these organisations and their target groups that are already done offline today could benefit from being supplemented via online as online interactions can be briefer and more efficient due to the fact that participants do not need to participate at the same time or be present at a certain location media [25].

Youngsters in need of help could benefit from working with organisations that employ social software as a tool to interact with them. The online medium is a medium these youngsters often feel at home at. Different studies mention the fact that such tools lower not only the physical barrier for approaching an organisation that could help them (less transport is required) but also the psychological barriers for interacting with welfare organisations in face-to-face contact to the disinhibitive effects of online communication [26].

## **5 Putting theory to practice: Making new Tools for the Trade**

An initial literature study and focus group interviews with youngsters, representatives from organisations in the field and ICT experts yielded a valuable source of information and inspiration regarding the potential use of social software to facilitate the interactions of social work organisations and their younger target groups. In order to connect this theory to the reality of social work we also needed to deliver all of this information in such a way that it would be understandable and useful to the social workers within our 4 partner organisations from Austria, Belgium, Poland and the UK. After all, it was the aim of the INCLUSO project not to just tell these organisations what to do, but to let them decide for themselves instead and merely provide them with the right tools, information and guidance they required to come up with valuable and effective strategies for ICT use within their organisation.

The information and tools needed to be available in such a way that they would be of use for other organisations outside of the scope of the INCLUSO project and serve as sustainable tools upon which could be built further. The pilot projects in the 4 partner organisations would provide us with an evaluation of these tools as well as an insight in which challenges and opportunities these organisations would encounter whilst executing the pilot projects [27]. Best practices on which ICT tools worked best and why (or why not) would be incorporated into a revised version of the INCLUSO project's output as well.

From our work on this project emerged a number of tools which were evaluated, revised and made publicly available near the end of the project: (1) A model connecting the sociological theory to the reality of social work we came to call 'The Big Picture'. (2) A whitebook bringing together the knowledge and experience gathered throughout this project and presenting a methodology for implementing ICT

and social software within social work organisations. (3) A measurement tool aimed at measuring the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters and thus measuring the effectiveness of an organisation's ICT supported initiatives over time. (4) A business and sustainability model helping organisations to setup their ICT supported initiatives in such a way that they are sustainable over time. (5) The INCLUSO Game, offering social work organisations a playful, yet inspiring tool that helps these organisations brainstorm about the potential of using social software tools as part of their organisation's strategies. In the next part of this publication, we delve a little deeper into the big picture model (1), the INCLUSO whitebook (2) and INCLUSO Game (5). Both measurement tool (3) and the business and sustainability model (4) are discussed in detail in the INCLUSO whitebook.

## 5.1 The Big Picture

The multidimensional nature of social exclusion and the fact that the specific face of social exclusion is so different from place to place has led us to conclude that the best approach in this project would be one that places the organisations working with marginalised youngsters in the center of our study. Rather than deciding upon a number of actions from the top down and forcing these organisations and their youngsters to partake in activities we define, we asked our partner organisations to look at their current activities and defined, together with them, different strategies to support these activities via a wide range of different social software tools.

To help us connect these actions to how they contribute to social inclusion and to enable us to better evaluate and compare the different actions undertaken in the 4 partner countries, we constructed the model shown in figure 1 based on our literature study and focus group interviews.

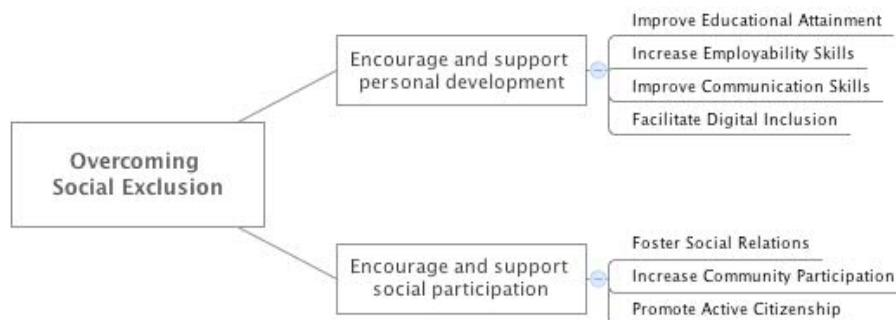


Figure 1 - Aligning the pilot actions with the theory on overcoming social exclusion

Activities towards alleviating social exclusion of marginalised youth within most welfare organisations can be placed within this model. The model also connects well with strategies on social inclusion as defined by the EU [4]. By employing different social software tools in a variety of activities placed within this model, we

aimed to create the basis for a useful matrix that can assist in defining which tools can best be implemented for which purpose and what the critical success factors are for their use in that particular case.

## **5.2 The INCLUSO Whitebook and INCLUSO Game**

The purpose of the INCLUSO Whitebook is to support organisations working with youth at risk and interested in integrating social media into daily practice. The whitebook is one of the tools that are part of the INCLUSO and focuses on the organisational perspective of using ICT within social work organisations. It presents a manual that helps the introduction of social media into the practice of youth work, taking into account the boundaries and opportunities of the organisation and lining up with the organisational goals. It was built up from desk research and the experience in the 4 INCLUSO pilot projects. In it, we start from the fact that social media tools like Netlog, Facebook, Ning or chatboxes are widely spread and have become part of young people's lives. On the other hand, social work organisations working with young people are often not very familiar with the possibilities that these new tools can bring into their daily practice. There is often even some hostility and fear that nothing but trouble will come out of this.

We push the idea forward that the use of social media can be used as a tool to support social inclusion of youth at risk if precautions are taken to limit possible negative aspects. By tapping into the aspirations of young people, new forms of communication can guide them to expand and diversify their networks to their benefit, to develop skills and interests and give them self-esteem.

The Whitebook is divided into 4 major parts: (1) How to Set Up a Project, (2) How to Run a Project (How to Engage with Young People), (3) Examples of What You Can Do and (4) Project Sustainability.

The first two parts talk about goals, organisation readiness and how to choose the right activities and related tools. To support this first step, a card game was developed.

The INCLUSO game was inspired by the 'Social by Social' game that was developed by David Wilcox, Amy Sample Ward and Andy Gibson, based on the Social Media Game originally developed by Beth Kanter, David Wilcox and Drew Mackie. The INCLUSO game took on board all of this and redesigned the game to fit into the INCLUSO concept, putting a focus on organisations that work with youth at risk.

The game takes about 2,5 hours to play by preferably 8 to 10 team members from one organisation, working with youth at risk and interested to take a quick tour around different aspects that will become part of a road map. The game cards introduce the type of organisation, the goals that can be pursued, the organisation readiness, planned activities in line with the chosen goals, tools and sustainability aspects. During the game, the participants discuss within time limits, all these topics and come across questions, opportunities and problems that will also occur as soon as the organisation starts implementing social media concepts into daily practice.

Furthermore the Whitebook discusses many pitfalls that are related to the fact that organisations working in the area of youth-at-risk often do not have a digital

culture at all. Introducing ICT and social software concepts will affect the whole organisation: the management's views, the communication with stakeholders, personnel matters, skills, technical set-up and support...

The experience within the 4 INCLUSO pilots showed that setting up a project does not always lead to success. Those activities that were inspired by the young people themselves were probably the most successful. Engaging with young people and connecting to their creativity and aspirations seem to be crucial. Youth at risk is vulnerable in many ways. Social media adds a new dimension to this vulnerability. Therefore it is at most important to give attention to safety, security, privacy and ethics when working with young people on the subject. These topics are discussed in the INCLUSO whitebook. Young people go online anyhow. If there is one good reason for youth workers to get involved, then is probably the fact that there is an important role for them in guiding young people to go online in a safe, secure, sensible way with respect for ethical principles.

Organisations investing in social media have a need to follow up on results. Methods for feedback and follow-up are also discussed in the Whitebook.

A special chapter is dedicated to "examples of what you can do". Throughout the 2 years of the INCLUSO project, pilots in 4 countries have tried out numerous things. Some were successful, other were not. This part of the Whitebook distills some of the ideas that have worked and that can inspire other organisations to get started.

Last but not least, attention is given to sustainability. Investing start-up money for ICT driven initiatives often has led to very low satisfaction and sometimes even frustration. It is clear that the introduction of ICT into daily practice of work with youth at risk will require organisational resources. These resources (staff time, investment in hardware, software, internet connections, technical support etc) can be important at the start of the project but the ambition should be to get return on investment and find ways to keep the on-line projects last. The INCLUSO business and sustainability model offers a framework to take on board different parameters that need to be monitored and optimised in order to make sure that the investment will lead to sustainable changes in the organisation.

## **8 Conclusion**

Our experiences with the INCLUSO project have certainly confirmed the potential of ICT and social software in specific as useful tools in supporting the interaction between social work organisations and their target group of marginalised youngsters. Many youngsters feel at ease in an online environment and whether they are met on the platform of their choice or guided towards a platform especially tailored to support the activities of a social work organisation, they seem open to interact with social workers in the digital world if approached correctly.

As we find ourselves at the beginning of social work's ventures in this area, we feel that organisations in the field are eager to explore, experiment and structurally embed the use of these fast evolving tools. At the same time there is a clear need within these organisations for methods that can help them do so. Whether these



methods be for organisations that are just starting out and are looking to be inspired or for more experienced organisations that are ready to incorporate the use of these tools in a more sustainable way. Tools like the INCLUSO whitebook and INCLUSO game are this project's answer to these needs.

Moreover as more and more organisations throughout Europe start working with social software tools, it makes sense to encourage them to gather and disseminate good and bad practices as they go. Models like the Big Picture could form a basis for better comparison and evaluation of different activities.

And not only social work organisations should take part in this gathering and sharing of practices. Academia could provide better insights into why certain tools could be useful in certain cases. Policy makers should join in so as to better scope the needs with regards to privacy and ethical policies. Software developers themselves need to join the discussion as well, so as to make sure that their tools are constructed in such a way that it answers to the social needs of youngsters, the specific demands of welfare organisations and policy makers.

Hence it becomes clear that a continuous dialogue between these partners is in order. The Internet is a fast evolving medium and youngsters are often apt at coping with this change. The time is ripe for welfare organisations and policy makers to develop the same aptitude.

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